US military suicides reach new high

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The number of serving American military personnel who took their lives in 2009 has already exceeded last year's record. These suicides are first of all tragic. Secondly, they indicate the immense psychological harm that the neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have inflicted on members of the armed forces.

The US Army, the largest branch of the military, suffered the most dramatic increase. By 16 November, 140 soldiers on active duty and 71 National Guard and Reserve personnel had taken their lives this year—a total of 211. By comparison, there were 52 Army suicides in 2001. The number steadily rose over the following years, reaching 197 in 2008.

The overall suicide rate in the US Army has reached 20.2 per 100,000 personnel. The Marine Corp recorded 42 suicides as of October 31—the same number as in all of 2008 and a rate of more than 19 per 100,000 personnel.

Among Americans in a comparable age bracket to military personnel, the annual suicide rate is approximately 19 per 100,000 people. For the overall US population, the rate in 2006 was 11.6 per 100,000, though the number is expected to have increased since the onset of severe recession and mass lay-offs.

The correlation between the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise in military suicides is clear. The rate among Navy and Air Force personnel—who have not been flung into the front lines of the conflicts—is roughly the same as 2001 and well below the national average. Before 2001, the Army and Marine rate was also below the national average and, more significantly, generally half that registered in a comparable age bracket. People seeking to enlist undergo psychological examinations. Those with diagnosable disorders that contribute to suicidal tendencies are generally turned down.

What has changed is the deployment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and marines to Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have been involved in or witnessed terrible events. At least one in five have returned with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A study of veterans with PTSD published in August by the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* found that 47 percent had had suicidal thoughts before seeking treatment and 3 percent had attempted to kill themselves.

Every day, an average of five members of the armed forces attempt suicide. Since 2003, close to 1,000 have succeeded—more than have died in the entire eight-year war in Afghanistan. Of that number, 41.8 percent had served one tour in either Afghanistan or Iraq, 10.3 percent had been sent on two deployments, 1.7 percent had served three tours and 0.9 percent had been deployed four or more times. The majority were male and under 30 years of age. More than half were married or divorced at the time.

Web searches produce numerous accounts of the terrible impact that suicide has wrought over the past eight years. A poignant interview with the wife of a soldier who took his life was published on November 29 by *MPNnow*, a Rochester, New York-based publication.

Tricia Hobart lost her husband and father of her three children on October 16, 2005. Mike Hobart committed suicide while back in the US on two weeks leave from a tour in Iraq. His leave was in order to receive treatment for nerve damage he suffered in an engagement.

Tricia Hobart told *MPNnow*: "I feel really bad for the families that have gone through what we have or that will be going through it in the future. After seeing what a year of deployment in Iraq did to my husband, I felt that there would be many more suicides to follow. Mike was a very loving, caring and understanding man, but after being in Iraq for many months, things changed his behaviour.

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“The men and women, after being there in times of war, are changed for life in one way or another. Some learn to deal with their nightmares and flashbacks of what they saw and did while there, and some cannot put it behind them. Unfortunately, for those men and women that can’t put it behind them, suicide is one of the ways they choose to deal with life after war.”

The suicides among serving personnel are only the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds of former soldiers, veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars who have left the military either voluntarily or involuntarily, are also taking their lives.

The US Department of Veteran Affairs does not kept an official tally. However, a study in 2007 commissioned by CBS News found staggering levels of suicide among Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. Of 6,256 veterans who took their own lives in 2005, for example, the highest rate was among former soldiers aged 20 to 24, which was estimated to be as much as four times higher than the national average.

The veterans’ suicide telephone hotline operating out of a clinic in Canandaigua, New York, has already taken 118,984 calls so far this year and believes it has prevented 3,709 veterans killing themselves.

The psychological problems suffered by many veterans are being compounded by the stresses flowing from the US economic downturn. A study earlier this year found that at least 15 percent of former soldiers aged 20 to 24 were unemployed. Overall unemployment among Afghanistan and Iraq veterans was at least 11.2 percent, compared with 8.8 percent among non-veterans in a comparable age bracket.

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